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ABSTRACT

Fifteen years ago, J. H. Rushing published a seminal article addressing the fragmentation within contemporary society and the ways in which myths (films) may address this exigence. The exigence of fragmentation is relieved, according to her analysis, by mediated recourse to the perennial philosophy of monistic holism that is found across the globe. This paper contends that Rushing's predictions for the future of hero-quests can be critically tested by analyzing a popular 1998 film, "The Thin Red Line," directed by Terrence Malick. The paper states that the film, while centering on a story of American soldiers during World War II's battle of Guadalcanal, also draws upon the perennial philosophy to offer modern audiences as a mediated reaction to the continued exigence of fragmentation. "The Thin Red Line," through drawing on the perennial philosophic references found in the ancient Hindu text, the "Bhagavad Gita," offers a diagnosis of the existential causes of fragmentation and provides an individual solution that audience members can integrate in confronting the fragmentation and suffering of individual existence. To present its argument, the paper first examines the predictions and implications for future hero-quests in Rushing's article. After presenting these, the paper explicates the perennial philosophy as a precursor to the analysis of "The Thin Red Line." It presents the perennial philosophy, as enshrined in "The Bhagavad Gita," and uses it in the analysis of "The Thin Red Line." The paper's conclusion provides implications drawn from this study, specifically in light of the predictions made by Rushing's study on hero-quests. (Cites 24 works.) (NKA)

Rhetorical Transcendence Revisited: The *Thin Red Line* as Perennial Philosophy

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-Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Rhetorical & Communication Theory Division, Atlanta, Georgia.

Rhetorical Transcendence Revisited: *The Thin Red Line* as Perennial Philosophy

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, Rushing (1985) published a seminal article addressing the fragmentation within our contemporary society and the ways in which our myths (films) may address this exigence. In analyzing the film *E.T.*, she concludes that it is "a particularly eloquent statement of how this exigence [of fragmentation/holism] is both presented and addressed in mass mediated public discourse" (189). The exigence of fragmentation is relieved, according to her analysis, by mediated recourse to the perennial philosophy of monistic holism that is found across the globe. Drawing upon the resources found in Jung's analysis of the collective unconscious, Rushing illustrates how the characters in *E.T.* instantiate the problems and solutions to modern life, which so often is fragmented by technology, class, economics, etc. The conclusion holds some important implications from this analysis concerning the future permutations of perennial philosophy in modern hero-quests.

It is at this point that this paper hopes to contribute to the scholarly research focusing on media, film, and philosophy. Rushing's predictions for the future of hero-quests can be critically tested by analyzing a popular film from 1998, *The Thin Red Line*, directed by Terrence Malick. This film, while centering on a story of U.S. soldiers during the battle of Guadalcanal during World War II, also draws upon the perennial philosophy in order to offer modern audiences a mediated reaction to the continued exigence of fragmentation. As Rushing (1985) notes, some exigencies transcend certain circumstances and confront the human race in its general existence. One such exigence is the fragmentation felt by members of a community, or in the more general sense, the "suffering" that being alive necessitates through death, illness, frustrated desires, etc. *The Thin Red Line*, through drawing on the perennial philosophic resources found in the ancient Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, offers such a diagnosis of the existential causes of fragmentation and provides a individual solution that audience members can integrate in confronting the fragmentation and suffering of one's existence. Through illustrating such a modern instance of this timeless myth, this paper hopes to advance the underdeveloped state of research into Indian rhetoric (Gangal & Hosterman, 1982; Kirkwood, 1989; 1992) and to demonstrate how many of Rushing's predictions for future hero-quests that address fragmentation are inaccurate. It is through the emphasis on transcendence found in such texts as the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Thin Red Line* that many of the predicted mythic innovations in modern hero-quests may very well not follow Rushing's pattern of holistic integration.

In order to present this argument, however, this paper will first examine the predictions and implications for future hero-quests that Rushing stated in her important article. After these have presented, the perennial philosophy will be explicated as a precursor to the analysis of *The Thin Red Line*. As Rushing's reading of this philosophic trend was quite adequate, this paper will adopt a different strategy; the perennial philosophy, as enshrined in an ancient religious/philosophical work, the *Bhagavad Gita*, will be presented and used in the analysis of the *The Thin Red Line*. This allows for more analytic depth and less hasty generalizations concerning a philosophic undercurrent (perennial philosophy) that has been adapted by most of the world's religions to some unique extent. This foundation will be used to analyze the *The Thin Red Line*, illustrating how it provides audiences with a mythic narrative that addresses the exigence of fragmentation. The conclusion of this paper will provide implications drawn from this study, specifically in light of the predictions made fifteen years ago by Rushing's important study of the perennial philosophy in modern hero-quests.

Predictions for Modern Hero-Quests

Rushing (1985) concludes her study of the archetypes within the film *E.T.* with some implications and predictions concerning future filmic hero-quests in the modern era. According the Rushing, "hero-quests" involve a hero that evolves and that holds a central part in the transcend myth being conveyed. The modern hero-quest begins to confront fragmentation and seeks "to display the ego as villain rather than hero" (Rushing, 1985, p. 192). *E.T.* exemplifies this mythic narrative and uses Jungian archetypes to convey its therapeutic message. It is on this basis that Rushing draws several implications from this modern answer to the problem of fragmentation.

The first implication concerns the future of mythic hero-quests, especially in the medium of film. Rushing argues that "the modern hero's task is to achieve the next stage of consciousness... Thus, the egoic hero's achievement was *dialectical*, and the modern hero's achievement will be *transcendent*. This implies that the transcendent hero will not slay the dragons, but will ultimately integrate them—even make them into

friends" (pp.198-199). As Elliot incorporated the lessons from his the enemies and E.T., he evolved to the next stage of consciousness, according to Rushing's analysis. This movement in modern hero-quests may result in some radical content shifts; Rushing indicates, "Perhaps the modern hero myth will be less violent than the classic one, more collaborative than competitive" (p. 199). The implication of this journey to holism and transcendence seems to imply, according the Rushing, a move to less competitive narratives and a focus on collaborative reintegration, holism, etc.

Another implication is that modern hero myths will be paradoxical to some extent. Rushing argues, "While myths may not *all* be paradoxical, it is likely that the new hero myth will take on this form . . . reasoning about Spirit always generates paradox..." (pp. 199-200). The clean arguments of past film narratives seem destined to be replaced by the paradoxical hero-quest for transcendence, in which the hero is both always already united with the underlying substratum of reality and temporally separate (thus necessitating a hero-quest). Rushing points out that the nature of the archetypes are particularly suited for conveying this paradox, since they enshrine contrary aspects in many of their forms (Jung, 1976; 1980). The modern hero-quest should appear to be quite paradoxical in its innermost messages, since this seems to be the language of the Spirit and of transcendence.

One final implication that shall be brought up is Rushing's suggestion that space films are the prime form of these new mythic narratives. She writes, "I also suggested that it is possible that a hero will come along eventually who will transcend the dialectic altogether, and that the most likely context would be space films" (p. 200). Space, it is argued, tends to suggest the cosmic over the cultural in mythic elements, and thus serves the role of creating a new communitarian frontier. In this regard, Rushing argues, "Perhaps space fiction can ultimately demonstrate that there is no tension to be had between individualism and community, since the individual is the whole and the whole is the individual" (p. 200). Thus, the film *E.T.* is taken as a rhetorical message that propounds this sense of holism and transcendence that links the community and the individual inseparably together. It is on this analysis of Rushing (1985) that the present study will attempt to extend and modify with its focus on the modern mythic narrative, *The Thin Red Line*. Before doing this, however, the perennial philosophy will be explicated using one of its prime instantiations, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Feuerstein, 1983; Sharpe, 1985).

The Perennial Philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*

The ancient Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, provides an instantiation of the perennial philosophy. According to Rushing, this "position holds that the Absolute is not an ontological Other separated from humanity by nature, but rather, the ground or condition of the universe" (p. 190). A similar description of the perennial philosophy is offered by Wilber (1996; 1998), emphasizing its transcendent nature over the individuated state of the ego. It is this perennial description of reality that is postulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, along with maxims concerning action in the face of this reality.

Before any explication of the *Bhagavad Gita* is initiated, a word concerning the context of this work is offered. The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient text that has been the leading emissary of Hindu ideas to the Western world. Minor (1986) indicates that it is the most translated book in the world after the Bible. It also was reputed to be Gandhi's favorite text, one that he read on a daily basis. Radhakrishnan (1998) adds that it is the most popular religious poem in Sanskrit. It is also important to realize that this relatively short work is situated in the midst of a longer, more literary work entitled the *Mahabharata* (Babbili, 1997), a work that is several times larger than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. The focus of this larger work was an epic power struggle between two factions of a warring family, the Kurus. Eventually, this family is drawn to war; this is where the *Bhagavad Gita* begins. Set against the backdrop of war, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna provide the audience with access to ideas covering all human existence. Arjuna begins to question whether he should fight his own family, even if the war appears to be for a just cause. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue focuses on this thematic persuasion. The *Bhagavad Gita* is laid out in short verses, which shall be cited by book/discourse number and verse number (i.e. 9:23). While many excellent translations exist for the *Bhagavad Gita* (Deutsch, 1968; Edgerton, 1995), this paper shall refer to the translation by Easwaren (1985). The following analysis will focus on the themes that emerge from this mythic narrative, an approach that has been validated by the literature on the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1987; 1989; Lewis, 1987; Rostock, 1992; Stroud, 2000).

The *Bhagavad Gita* includes many narrative elements that instantiate a major part of the perennial philosophy, the notion that the world is intimately connected and linked together. Concerning the

metaphysical theme of the relation between the everyday notion one has of self (physical/empirical) and the ultimate source of all things (Brahman, or "ultimate" Self). Krishna has much to say. While Arjuna fears the evil that lies within killing his own relations and friends, Krishna implores him to uphold his duty. Krishna argues that the physical self (egoic) is merely an illusion, and that the "ultimate" Self within us does not die:

One man believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? (2:19-21).

Here the idea is introduced that the world and the self we typically think of as being "real" is an illusion; the actions that we take here really do not affect one's true personality. The real meaning of one's "self" is in relation to the "ultimate" Self, personified by Krishna in human guise. It is this Self that is described as "The Self of all beings" (2:30). Krishna continues this explanation by saying "I [Krishna as the personification of ultimate Self] am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature...all life [is] my manifestation" (6:30). Even the perceived change in the world all takes place within the ultimate metaphysical reality of the Self; "The birth and dissolution of the cosmos takes place in me. There is nothing that exists separate from me" (7:6-7).

Even the multiplicity of forms one observes in everyday life has its basis in ultimate Self; "all the different qualities found in living creatures have their source in me" (10:5). Even the creatures themselves (including humans) are all fundamentally united with the ultimate Self; "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of their existence" (10:20). Arjuna eventually acknowledges that "You [Krishna as ultimate Self] pervade everything; you are everything" (11:40). Thus, the typical individuation that we intuitively sense about our existence is an illusion; Brahman, or ultimate Self, is the true reality.

The second theme in the *Bhagavad Gita* deals with how one is to act upon becoming enlightened about the true nature of ultimate Self. Since one's empirical self is an illusion, how is one to act? What is the goal of action? Initially, Krishna points out that "there is no one who rests for even an instant; every creature is driven to action by his own nature" (3:5). Thus, Arjuna must act in the situation he finds himself in; retreat and inaction are not options. The true sense of being that Arjuna aims for is enlightenment; Krishna indicates that he should "seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness" (2:49). This attitude of detachment comes from the dispelling of the empirical self; "they live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart" (2:55).

The fundamental impetus for action is the recognition that action is unavoidable and that the self is an illusion. Given these two claims, one must try to act in such a way as to not deny the reality of ultimate Self. Krishna implores Arjuna to "use all your power to free the senses from attachment and aversion alike, and live in the full wisdom of the self" (2:68). The rewards of this union with the ultimate Self are immense; "they are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of 'I,' 'me,' and 'mine' to be united with the Lord [ultimate Self]. This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to immortality" (2:71). Arjuna is told to "act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit" (3:9) and to "fight! But stay free from the fever of the ego" (3:30). The overarching theme is that action should be performed with the realization that ego is an illusion; selfless action leads to liberation from the trap of ego attachment. It is these two themes that inform not only the narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but also the traces of the perennial philosophy within *The Thin Red Line*.

The Perennial Philosophy of *The Thin Red Line*

Two similar themes emerge within the frequent voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line*; the perennial ideas of the ultimate Self and selfless action are evident in the meta-narrative over the war story in this film. As Coleman (1999) notes, "the characters are all blended together [in the voice-overs]" (p. 2); Turan (1999) adds "it's anyone's guess at certain moments which one [character] is speaking [during the voice-over]" (p. 2). This leads to the distancing of the viewer from the secondary narrative (the war story) during the primary narrative about existential matters (Nelson, 1999). The first voice-over, apparently recited by Doll, states, "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contends with the sea. Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" Here the theme of individuation in nature is

being explored; why is there so much violence in the world? During this voice-over, shots of vine-entangled trees are shown, contrasted with peaceful shots of natives swimming and going about daily life.

Another voice-over also depicts the tropical flora and fauna; birds and waving trees that creak and groan against the assault of the wind are shown. The voice of Doll says, "Who are you that lives in all these many forms? You're death that captures all. You too are the source of all that's going to be born. You're glory, mercy, peace, truth; you give calm a spirit." The theme of a common soul or Self behind the diversity in this phenomenal world is evident in this important voice-over. Not only is nature at war, it is fighting itself. This concept of ultimate Self in this film is extended in the next voice-over, this time by Witt, who states, "Maybe all men got one big soul, where everybody's a part of it. All faces of the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal, drawn from the fire." Here the meta-narrative is arguing that the ultimate Self that encompasses all of nature also subsumes humanity. This voice-over takes place against a silent depiction of Witt at the medic camp, consoling wounded soldiers and observing the suffering of individuals in this war effort. The idea of ego-attachment and separation are looked down upon as means to "salvation" in that they inevitably lead to the quickly dying ember or spark of life, like a coal pulled out of the fire. Witt selflessly comforts a wounded soldier by splashing water on his heated body; the suffering of others emerges as a potent reminder of our ultimate unity.

Toward the end of the film, Doll narrates another voice-over, this one set against a montage of shots from the soldier's setting up camp for the night and the beautiful scenery itself. Doll states, "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. But death's got the final word; it's laughing at them. Another man sees that same bird and feels the glory, feels something smiling through it." As the last lines are spoken, the image of Witt sleeping is focused on, a foreshadowing of thematic developments to come. The voice-over addresses the issue of death and immortality of our individuated selves; if the empirical self is to escape finitude, it must avoid death. But this narrative tells us that death has the "final word;" death always claims the empirical self, be it a bird or the warring soldiers. Enlightenment about the true nature of reality allows one to see the ultimate base of life and reality shining through the empirical self; in this case, the dying bird is employed as a metaphor for human frailty. The theme emerging from these voice-overs is that the empirical egos and selves that populate this world are not the true basis of reality; there is a greater, more ultimate Self behind it all.

The second theme that emerges from these voice-overs concerns action in the face of this world of change and hardship. At the start of the film, Witt states

I remember my momma when she was dying. She looked all shrunk up and gray. I asked her if she was afraid and she just shook her head; I was afraid to touch the death I see in her. I couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God... I wondered how it would be like when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now is the last one you're ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way as she did, with the same calm. Cause that's where it's hidden, the immortality that I hadn't seen.

The issue of death is ever present in the war narrative; it is more fundamentally present in the primary narrative of this film that speaks on issues facing every human. Here we are given images of Witt on the beach and observing native life while recounting the feelings and thoughts he had concerning the specter of death. Death can be met in a noble fashion with a air of detachment and calm; fearfully and stubbornly clinging to one's ego does not allow for immortality or transcendence.

As if to emphasize this primary narrative argument, the example of Witt is utilized in the context of the war. Witt, throughout the entire film, strove toward the ideals of non-violence and compassion for others. He was kind to both wounded U.S. soldiers and to the captured Japanese soldiers. This theme was further reified in the climax of the film when Witt distracts a group of Japanese soldiers from pursuing the rest of his unit. He draws them away, but eventually is surrounded by them. Instead of giving up, he waits a few pensive moments and then raises his rifle, instantly drawing the lethal fire of the soldiers around him. Here was Witt's ultimate act of selflessness and duty, saving his fellow soldiers and calmly letting go of his attachment to his empirical self.

Implications

Several implications can be drawn from the contrast between the 1998 film, *The Thin Red Line*, and Rushing's predictions for the modern hero-quest. Initially, Rushing's insistence on the paradoxical nature of the modern hero-quest is putatively contradicted by this successful film. Here the audience is

confronted with a protagonist, Witt, from the first few minutes of the three-hour film and continue to follow his trials through the whole quest. The goal of this quest, intended or not, is the transcendence that Rushing finds in Elliot at the hands of E.T. The irony, of course, is that the voice-overs in this film help reduce the paradox within the narrative. The way this is accomplished is through the split levels of primary and secondary narratives; the former discuss the "universal" themes of ultimate unity among living things, etc., and the latter illustrate a particular story about a particular group of soldiers. The interplay between these two levels does not generate paradox; on the contrary, it helps to build the force and detail behind the primary narrative. Thus, audiences can take Witt's example as a call to selfless action that dispels the illusion of the empirical self/ego. Whereas an archetypal look at the characters in *E.T.* yield some amount of paradox due to the contrary potentialities often enshrined within archetypes themselves, the primary and secondary narratives of this mythic story extract a fairly consistent message concerning the unity of the empirical world and the value of certain actions in the face of this knowledge (i.e., the perennial philosophy). By conveying the perennial elements of the hero-quest within the primary narrative, *The Thin Red Line* avoids the "necessary" element of paradox, since it is constructing an appeal to the audience to see the empirical world as essentially united and our empirical egos as essentially illusory. By relying on the two levels of narrative, *The Thin Red Line* avoids some of the inherent paradox in relying solely on archetypes within the story of a film.

Contrary to Rushing's (1985) analysis, the modern hero-quest for transcendence does not need to be told using the backdrop of space fiction. One observes in *The Thin Red Line* a mythic film that constructs a modern hero-quest involving Witt and the particular circumstances he is faced with during World War II. Even with the locus of the entire film virtually chained to one small island in the Pacific Ocean, the transcendent issues that are addressed soar quite high. Whereas *E.T.* was judged successful at conveying issues of transcendence due to its use of the unlimited frontier of space, *The Thin Red Line* uses a distanced primary narrative conveyed through voice-overs to construct the "timeless" and unlimited themes of ultimate unity, selfless action, etc. against the secondary narrative of a fixed space and time during the battle of Guadalcanal. In a fashion very similar to the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Thin Red Line* abstracts from a concrete war and relates the themes of life, death, action, and Self to every existential situation. Thus, Krishna can advise selfless action in whatever action a person (Arjuna, etc.) takes, and the characters in the voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line* can muse about the impermanence of nature and conflict within the illusory empirical world. Perhaps the modern hero-quest can achieve transcendence best within its plot only if some type of narrative distancing is used, such as voice-overs or abstract poetic elements that foster a primary and secondary narrative.

The third implication of this analysis is that Rushing's (1985) conception of how the transcendent hero-quest will translate into filmic narratives is fundamentally limited. Instead of the modern hero-quest integrating the dragons, as Rushing indicates, the modern hero can radically transcend the illusion of empirical separateness. Indeed, Rushing's analysis did not go far enough; instead of collaborative ventures to befriend the enemies (dragons), the modern hero exemplified by Witt can achieve a state of mind where they can transcend the plane of "friends" and "enemies" (i.e., the empirical self and the empirical world). The next stage of heroic consciousness does not simply translate to Rushing's predicted stories of less violence, more collaboration, revelations of community worth/value, but instead enshrines a transcendence of these facets of the illusory empirical world. Thus, Krishna can advise Arjuna that no soul ever dies or slays, and Witt can face death with an attitude that holds immortality for him, as it did for his mother when she died. Facing the Japanese soldiers and remembering his life in his unit and at home, Witt can uphold his duty and selflessly let his empirical self go in rain of enemy fire, for there is no "enemy," no self named "Witt," and no true reward for selfishly grasping to the empirical self as the be-all-end-all of being. Instead, he can let all issues of individuality and community go in his transcendence of the illusory (individuated) world.

It is this type of action and selflessness that Doll honors in the final voice-over. Amidst shots of leaving the island on a transport ship, he states "Darkness and light, strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining." The shot fades into a serene scene of a coconut sprouting a new shoot on a beach, with islands and sky in the background. These images and words point to the over-riding argument of the narrative; there is something larger than the self's humans believe they

physically inhabit. Spiritually, humans can believe that both good and evil within this world might be mere illusions, "features of the same face." Both of these texts, either in the personage of Arjuna or Doll, beg for reunification with the source of our illusory selves—one wants their empirical self to "be in you [the larger sense of Self] now." Just as the coconut stands at the edge of every element by itself, humanity stands alone in its self-imposed exile from the over-arching ultimate Self. The aim of these two works, however, is to allow the audience to realize the interconnectedness and fundamental unity to all things, coconuts and humans alike.

The modern hero-quest narrative of *The Thin Red Line*, while not following Rushing's (1985) predictions and conceptions, does proffer an answer to the fragmentation that the modern audience may be feeling. Indeed, this worry of separation is not new—the perennial philosophy within the *Bhagavad Gita* addressed it thousands of years ago. By focusing on the interplay between primary and secondary narratives within a filmic text and the true implications of heroic transcendence, *The Thin Red Line* can be seen as a successful mythic answer/response to modern American feelings of fragmentation. Whereas this film addresses the same issues that *E.T.* does, this analysis has extracted from it differing implication than Rushing did fifteen years ago in her important article. *The Thin Red Line*, in a similar fashion to the *Bhagavad Gita*, provides a myth that implores the audience to see unity in diversity, illusion in the empirical self, and a path of selfless action that is a result of this metaphysical enlightenment.

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